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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the characteristics of high school and college as life stages of young people in Japan and the United States and suggests some of the ways in which these experiences mesh with the demands of the occupational structure. The paper first contrasts the differences in the Japanese and American student experience during their high school education, particularly as it applies to the levels of parental and peer control and influence. Next, the paper examines the college experience within Japan and the United States in its transitional role from high school to entry into society. Finally discussed is the permanency, timeliness, and control of one's life choices involving occupational success as experienced in both societies. Overall, Japanese society provides greater guidance and control over life choices, whereas in the United States adult control is mostly absent after high school allowing for greater individual decision making. This freedom to make independent choices so freely, however, can cause disruptive and even catastrophic events in the individual and society; whereas in Japan, the college experience results in a smoother transition into society which often is not very costly in terms of either personal or social stability. The United States allows for corrections of wrong choices early in life; Japan is less forgiving. (GLR)

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College: Its Relation to High School and Employment Requirements in Japan and the United States

Ann Cordilia

When we look at the institutions in our own culture, we tend not to see them very distinctly. We are like fish in water—if a fish were asked to describe water, he could not because it is the only environment which he knows. However, an amphibian who could also experience air might be able to give a good description of water.

In the same way, social scientists who study only their own country probably do not perceive many essential features. These features are so taken for granted that they appear to be natural, to be the only way that things could possibly be arranged.

I am grateful that my own experience of spending a year in Japan as a Fulbright Fellow at Nanzan University has helped me to become a kind of cultural "amphibian" and has given some depth to my perception of the institutions of my own country. Since I have come to Japan, I have been studying college students: the lifestyle of students, what college means to them and how the college experience meshes with high school and work life. As a result of comparing American and Japanese college life, the unique features of each have become more visible. However, while the U. S. and Japanese college experiences are in themselves quite interesting, what has become strikingly apparent is that college is not an institution that stands alone; rather it is embedded in the life course of members of a particular society. Thus, it is affected by the high school experiences that precede it and the work experience which follow and it

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is shaped by the demands which each society imposes on young people. it in the lives of young people and it is affected by the requirements which society puts on people.

In this article I would like to examine the characteristics of high school and college as stages of the life course of young people in Japan and the United States and to suggest some of the ways in which these experiences mesh with the demands of the occupational structure. In particular, I will focus on two issues:

1. Continuity and contrast with preceding and later periods of life. In Japan, college is a unique period of life, usually entered into after high school or "cram school" and distinctly different from the preceding and following periods. Most striking is the contrast with the highly controlled high school years for it is in the college years when students are allowed their first experiences of adult pleasures and privileges.

In the United States in contrast, college may be described as a "diffuse" experience with unity neither of time nor of character. It is an experience which may last over a number of years, which may be entered into early or later in life, and which may be left and taken up again. In addition, while it is different from the high school and work experiences, it shares many characteristics with them. Most importantly, many "adult" privileges are first experienced in high school, so the disjunction between the high school and college experiences is not so great.

2. "Second chance" vs. irrevocable choices. The United States is the land of the "second chance," whether with regard to education, work or even marriage. This means that decisions taken early in life can be altered later on.

In Japan, in contrast, important decisions relevant to career must be made during the high school and college years and life decisions in general are less easily changed, The availability of second chances in the United States and the degree to which early and irrevocable decisions must be made in Japan sheds light on the nature of the educational experience in both countries.

College in the U. S. and Japan: A Not-Very-Distinct Period of Life vs. an Orderly Progression

The first point that must be made in looking at the continuity and contrast of the college experience with the preceding and succeeding periods

of life is that, in comparison with Japan, college in the U. S. is an experience which need not take place at any particular time of life.

While it is true that, at some small liberal arts colleges and at some of the very élite universities, almost all students are between the ages of 18 and 23, about 40% of all students enrolled in American higher education are 25 years of age or older.[1] The majority of students do not complete college within four years[2] and over 40% of students attend college part-time.[3] These figures indicate that, for many Americans, the college experience is lived simultaneously with other major life experiences such as work and marriage. Students do not necessarily go to college right after high school. They may work and then enter college; they may enter college, drop out and then return; they may work, get married have children, and then go to college. Or they may do all of these things simultaneously.

This of course is in strong contrast to the Japanese system. For most Japanese college students, life experiences follow each other in a more orderly progression. Here college is viewed as an institution to be entered at a specific time of life, that is, after high school. In addition, once entered, 75% of students complete college with four years.[4] Students usually enter the work force full-time after graduation from college and marry a few years after that.

Pre-College Life in the U. S. and Japan: Peer-Centered vs. Adult-Centered Adolescents

The unity of the Japanese college experience and the diffuseness of the American experience is more than just temporal, however. In addition, the character of the college years in relation to the rest of the life course has a certain unity in Japan which contrasts with the diffuseness of the American college experience. The diffuseness of the American college experience is revealed clearly when college life is compared with the lifestyles of the high school student and the employee. The lifestyle of college students is different from that of high school students, but not vastly different. College is also different from work, but again not vastly different. In contrast, in Japan, the three phases of life are distinctly different in character.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the American experience is the similarity between high school and college life. The central issue here is that

in the U. S. the high school experience provides the greatest single transition period into an adult lifestyle and that this transition is simply carried further in college.

The high school period in the United States is a time of experimentation and exploration during which adolescents get a taste of the freedom of adulthood without being burdened by much of the responsibility. It is a time when students live a peer-centered lifestyle which is, to a great extent, out of the control of adults, whether teachers or parents. In contrast, in Japan, high school ac e students live the lives of children; they are strongly under adult control; the goals toward which they work are determined by adults and their lives are centered in home and in school.

Perhaps the most compelling comparison between American and Japanese students can be made when the scope of our inquiry is widened beyond school to all phases of high school students' lives. Here we can observe a striking pattern of differences and it is clear that the insulation of American students from adult control is quite far-reaching. High school age students participate in two institutions which are, at least in theory, dominated by adults: the high school and the family. We will argue here however that adult control within these institutions has diminished along with the amount of time which adolescents spend within their confines.

American high school students are expected to pressure their parents for more independence and parents recognize that they must loosen their control over them. During the high years, adolescents begin to move out of the home, mentally if not physically, and to replace closeness to the family with ties to peers. It often has been noted that, in the United States, high school is a time of great social independence, characterized by an "explosion of peer centered activity" which distances teenagers from the influence of their parents. According to a 1977 study of teenagers in Indiana, 47% of girls and 57% of boys were away form home in the evening at least 5 times a week during the school year. In addition, almost half of American high school seniors have at least one date each week and even more usually go to a party on the weekend. The activities of these peer groups are often conducted independently of adult supervision. The vast majority of high school students experiment with alcohol and/or drugs and participation in sexual activity is the norm.[8]

The high school of course plays a large role in adolescent life and, at least in theory, is a way in which adults shape and educate students. While

this is certainly true to a degree, it has been a commonplace observation for many years that the adolescent subculture has an extremely strong influence on American high school students and that they are in many ways insulated from adult guidance and control. The definition of high school success of most American high school students—athletic prowess and popularity—tend to reflect the influence of the adolescent subculture rather than that of parents or teachers. High schools have tried to respond to the low interest of students in academic accomplishment by giving students a great deal of freedom in their choice of courses and by designing electives with an eye to meeting student interests. In addition, within classes, teachers increasingly try to involve students by altering their teaching style; for example they may replace lectures with class discussions which encourage students to develkp and express their own opinions.[10]

Adult control of "private" student behavior within the schools is also minimal. Dress codes for example are almost non existent and a variety of types behavior such as smoking or drug taking may be tolerated as long as they are done discreetly and do not cause disruption.[11]

This freedom comes without a great deal of responsibility for academic accomplishment. Many students avoid difficult courses, regularly miss classes, and spend little time studying. In the United States, high school students on average study less than one hour per night ajd at all during the long summer vacations.[12] In consequence, as might be expected, the average level of academic accomplishment is not very high.[13]

American teenagers also have access to money and cars, the trappings of adulthood which support a peer-centered lifestyle. How do American high school students obtain the money to buy cars and other consumer goods? The main way is through the jobs which are held by the majority of high school students. Among high school seniors, about 80% have held a job at some time during the school year.[14] Students work long hours. On average, seniors who were employed worked 15 to 20 hours per week and nearly 10% worked 35 or more hours per week.[15] These students are in a position to make a great deal of money. It has been estimated that employed seniors who work make an average of $275 per month, most of which is used for discretionary spending on cars, clothes, etc. It is not surprising therefore that about half of all high school seniors own their own car.[16]

In contrast to all of this, Japanese students live in an adult- controlled

home-and school-centered environment where they remain children without the privileges of adults. Their lives are dominated by the adult goal of passing the college entrance examinations and high school life is organized around this aim. Elective classes are few; rote learning is stressed; and long hours of study are required. High school students study an average of 2 hours per night on week days and three hours on Sundays and about 10% attend "cram school" after school or during summer vacations.[17] In addition, adults are in firm control of the private behavior of students: strict dress codes are common and schools have the right to control a variety of types of private behavior such as smoking and riding motor bikes.[18] Thus, the high school years in Japan are a time of little freedom and great responsibility for hard work.

When they are not in school, Japanese teenagers have a basically home-centered existence and the adolescent subculture so characteristic of high school students in the U. S. is far less well-developed. Outside of school, students spend less than 1/2 hour per day with peers during the week and only 2 to 3 hours on Sunday. It has been estimated that, in a given week, fewer than one in twenty Japanese students date or attend a party given by peers.[19] In addition, the money and cars which give American students so much freedom and which support a peer subculture are less readily available. Many high schools forbid students to hold jobs and only about 21% of students work during the school term. The bicycle is the standard transportation for high school students. Automobile licenses are not available until the age of eighteen and, though sixteen-year-olds may legally operate motorbikes, many high school restrict their use.[20]

Transition to College in the U. S. and Japan

For those American students who enter college directly from high school, the transition to college in the U. S. brings with it some major changes in lifestyle. However, the disjunction between the high school and the college experience is not always very sharp. As we have seen, most American students have already tasted some of the privileges and freedoms of adulthood during high school. College however mean an increase in responsibility. Students may live away from home for the first time and most students have to study harder than they did in high school; grades are important and there is always the possibility of "flunking out." Furthermore, most students have the added responsibility of paying part of their

tuition through money earned from part-time jobs and, while the money earned in high school often can be spent on luxuries, college earnings are often used for necessities.[21] Of course, for the many older students who enter or return to college after working for a few years, the transition to college offers fewer new experiences and is less of a significant step on the path to adulthood.

In Japan, in contrast, college is a radically different experience from high school. By the very fact of entering a university, students are almost assured of job offers, so the pressure to achieve academically, which is so much a part of high school, is dramatically lessened.[22] In addition, like the American high school, the Japanese college is an introduction to the privileges of adulthood with few of the responsibilities. From my interviews I learned that Japanese students make a sharp distinction between high school and college. They consider college to be a kind of moratorium period snugly sandwiched between high school and work. It is a unique time of freedom and leisure and, within its confines, they are free to decide their goals and choose their activities. For most students, college brings a host of new experiences: they make their own money from part-time jobs, meet new people in unsupervised settings, spend long hours socializing with friends, go to long trips,consume alcohol and associate more freely with the opposite sex.

College Years in Contrast to Work Years

Though this paper focuses mainly on the transition from high school to college, a few comments are in order about the transition from college to work. Mirroring the high school-college transition, the changes involved in the transition between college and the later work years is less sharp in the U. S. than in Japan. As has been noted, many American students have already worked full time before entering college. Others do not begin their careers right out of college, and instead choose to prolong a period of exploration and experimentation.[23] They may take non-career jobs; they may change jobs often; or they may take time off to travel for a while. Still others work for a few years and then quit in order to return to the university as graduate students.

The post-college experience in Japan is dramatically different. One month after graduation, many students will enter the company for which they may work for the rest of their lives. In a short space of time, they are

transformed as if by magic into *shakaijin* and are confronted with a very different set of expectations from society. Students perceive that, as *shakaijin*, the level of freedom that they have experienced in the university will be sharply curtailed. Very suddenly they will be faced with adult responsibilities. They will have to be circumspect in their dress and manner of behavior; their working hours will increase and their vacations will shrink. According to almost all of the Japanese students I interviewed, college is a special, never-to-be-repeated free time of life when one is able to explore, experiment and get to know oneself in preparation for the next stage of life. It is a limited moratorium period which ends with a rigidly scheduled transition into another phase of life. I could not phrase it better than the student quoted below:

College students want to learn what they want to do in the future and how they want to lead their lives. So they try various things. College students enjoy their free time, their free lives, because they can only do this as students. They experience as many things as possible, because only a youth can do this and only during college. Such experiences may be important for their future. Campus life may be the period that makes child-like thinking into adult thinking. College is the place to become a better person, to get more experience, more practice, more training so that a person can become suited to society.

Decisions, Revocable and Irrevocable: The Demands of the Employment and the Nature of Education

Margaret Mead once said, in speaking about the high divorce rate in the U. S.:

> In the U. S., no choice is irrevocable. All persons should be allowed to move if they don't like their present home, change schools, change friends, change political parties,change religious affiliations. With freedom to choose goes the right to change one's mind. If past mistakes are to be reparable in every other field of human relations, why should marriage be the exception?[24]

In the United States, it is very possible to make a variety of mistakes and then to rectify them. We can go to a junior college and then transfer our credits to a university. We can drop out of college and then return or we can enter college late in the first place. Once in college, we can change

majors endlessly. We can change jobs and we can change spouses. Children are a permanent commitment; there are no "trial children.".[25] However, almost everything else can be changed; almost every other commitment can be abrogated.

It is noteworthy that this availability of "second chances" is congruent with American educational ideas and the American educational system. At least in theory, most Americans believe that children should learn by doing and should make their own mistakes. As Rohlen puts it:

> The foundation of the American notion of maturation lies in its focus on experience, choice and judgment. We make our own destinies and are responsible for our own choices, therefore our young need to practice making up their own minds. This requires freedom, but ironically, only maturation is a guarantee that freedom will be used wisely. Between childhood and adulthood, adolescents are seen as passing through a dangerous time of transition in which many pay a price for misusing freedom. But our general commitment to the cultural ideal of individualism makes this a price we are ready to pay.[26]

Conceivably, this commitment is a luxury which is affordable only in a society where choices can be made late and mistaken choices are remediable. Adolescence is a dangerous time in the U. S. and many young people make tragic mistakes.

remediable. Adolescence is a dangerous time in the U. S. and many young people make tragic mistakes. But perhaps one of the reasons why parents are able to allow their children to make their own errors is that many (though unfortunately not all) mistakes can be corrected. If a student does not study in high school or even quits school, it is possible to return to school later if the student is motivated to do so. If one is not serious about a career in one's early 20's, one can become serious in one's late 20's or even in one's 30's. Thus, people can re-set their own course later in life; the decisions made while young are not necessarily binding.

This flexible system is in strong contrast to the situation in Japan where students must make early decisions which are irrevocable and which will deeply affect them for the rest of their lives. The Japanese educational system is a one-way street where the correct road must be taken at each intersection and where little back-tracking is possible. For a student to become a doctor, for example, s/he must decide to study hard in junior high school in order to be admitted to an appropriate senior high school.

Then by senior year of high school, s/he must make the choice to enter the medical department of a university. Even for students with less ambitious goals, the decision to study or not to study in junior and senior high school is a momentous one, and those students who choose not to study will probably be unable to reverse the effect of that decision later in life. Once students have been admitted to a department in a university, their occupational fate is to a great degree already determined, since companies and government recruit students on the basis of the status of their universities and changing colleges after entrance is almost impossible. "Late- bloomers" who decide to apply themselves to their studies after entrance to college cannot markedly affect their occupational fate.

During the course of my research, I have talked to a number of medical students, all of them told me that they had decided to work toward entering medical school before they were old enough to have any realistic idea of what it means to be a doctor. Rather than being their own, this decision was heavily influenced by parents and teachers. For all students, the decision to study hard in order to enter a good college must be made during junior high school and high school before they have the life experience to understand the wisdom of such a decision. This puts a big responsibility on adults to shape children's thinking; if adults wait for children to mature so that they can make decisions based on their own experience, the time for the decision will have passed. It is clear that, given the requirements of the society for early unchangeable decisions, encouraging individualism and independent thinking in high school could lead students to make dangerously wrong choices. Thus, the rigid goal-oriented high school educational system is clearly a protection for students who might otherwise stray from the prescribed course.

While probably the most important decisions relevant to occupational success are made in high school, college students are faced with the necessity of choosing the company which they will join; the decision to enter a company is best made in senior year in college and it too is a far-reaching one. A student is at the height of his/her desirability as an employee right after graduation from college and, particularly if he is a male, may be choosing the company which he will stay with for the rest of his working life.

The high degree of adult control in the pre-college years leaves many students intimidated by the necessity of making such a momentous choice in their senior year, since most of them have had little experience in mak-

ing independent decisions. This dilemma underscores for students the importance of the opportunity which college offers as a time to get to know themselves, so that the decision will be an appropriate one for them. Some students describe themselves as having been on a railroad in junior and senior high school; this railroad moved them from place to place without any real direction from them. College is a time when they begin to have the opportunity to give some direction to that railroad so that at least this final decision can in some way be a reflection of their own individual needs and preferences.

Conclusion

Exploring the interaction between the college system and the larger society in the U. S. and Japan suggests certain basic differences between the two societies. The United States is a society which provides maximal freedom and minimal guidance for its members. Beginning in high school, young people are released from adult control and are encouraged to make choices based on their own experience. Inevitably, this leads to many wrong choices, indeed to many tragic mistakes. However, the society also allows people to change their choices, even though this may have a great cost in personal and social stability. In order to accommodate these changes, the institutions of society must be very flexible. The fluid nature of college education fits with the necessity for Americans to constantly re-create their lives.

To give an example, the expected divorce rate for new marriages in the United States is now about 50%.[27] Many women, who once relied on their husbands as the main family breadwinner, get divorced and must learn to depend on themselves economically. These women must fundamentally re-create their lives in their late 20's or 30's or even 40's. An essential part of this process is the development of a new career. Many of these women come to the university for this very purpose and the university is able to accommodate them.

Japan is a society which has a very different structure. This society provides greater guidance to its members and more closely circumscribes the choices which are available. College however provides a kind of moratorium period during which the demands of society for conformity and hard work are lessened and in which students have the leisure and opportunity for personal self-exploration. It is a limited period of freedom

however which is bounded by work and high school and work, two more structured periods of life. the end of the moratorium period, graduation from college, is clearly defined; at that point, students expect to enter the work world and to become full members of society. College there fore provides the society with a relatively undisruptive moratorium period, a period which is not very costly in terms of either personal or social stability.

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25. I am indebted to Gail Sheehy for this observation which she made in her book, *Passages*.

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